

**Rev. Kevin V. Madigan**  
**Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC**  
**May 23, 2021 Streaming Mass**  
**Pentecost 2021 Acts 2:1-11**

A few hours ago 4,000 miles away in Rome, Italy there was a rather unusual, yet beautiful celebration of today's feast of Pentecost. It took place in the Pantheon, the ancient Roman temple that centuries ago was converted into a church. The Pantheon is most notable for its dome, and in the center of the dome is a circular empty space, called the "oculus" or the "eye," which allows sunlight to come into the interior of the building. So, how do they celebrate Pentecost in the Pantheon? Every year fire fighters climb the exterior walls of the dome and go to its center, the "oculus," the "eye," through which they toss thousands of rose petals. These rose petals, glistening in the sunlight, descend upon the assembled crowd below, to the accompaniment of the organ playing thunderously "Come Holy Ghost, Creator blest and in our hearts take up Thy rest." It evokes the tongues of fire descending upon the apostles on the first Pentecost. Of course, it is theatrical, but then again this is from the same people who gave us opera. It is the liturgical equivalent of the finale of Pucini's "Turandot." It is a celebration of joyful exuberance. That is what the first Pentecost was all about. You can watch the scene by simply googling "Rome," "rose petals" and "Pentecost" in any order, but don't do it now; wait until after Mass.

Our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles records, "There appeared to them tongues as of fire, which parted and came to rest on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit." The flame separates and comes to each of the disciples individually, in so far as each is capable of receiving the Holy Spirit. This is Jesus whom they had come to know in the flesh—the Teacher who provided them with wisdom, the Leader who gave direction to their lives, the Example they might someday imitate. Jesus was all that for them, but at the same time He was always Someone apart from them, Someone beside them, Someone exterior to them. Now in Pentecost the risen Jesus enters the hearts of the disciples that His own Spirit might "conspire" with their human spirit, their desires, their hopes, their dreams, so that now there is a unity of purpose, of will, of direction.

The disciples of Jesus begin to know for themselves the very same God whom Jesus knew in His own passion, death and resurrection. And not in some vague, theoretical, abstract way, but intimately, deep in their hearts and minds. The events of Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Sunday all hit home with an intensity that hitherto had either dumbfounded or panicked them. The love of God in Jesus now takes possession of their lives to transform them totally. The love of God, broken on the

cross on Good Friday, but raised on Easter Sunday is alive for them. The challenge for us is to be more open to the same possibility, so that the events of the Gospel are not just something buried in a book, or lost in a distant past, but are able to reach us in that place where we struggle to make the message of Jesus our own.

Pentecost is the fulfillment of the promise first uttered by the prophet Ezekiel, "I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them. I will remove their hearts of stone and give them hearts of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my commandments"—a kind of soul transplant. Pentecost provides the possibility of that interior kind of growth, wherein one is not tossed about at the whim of instinct and desire, nor is one the slave of an overly rigid set of rules and regulations. Pentecost provides the possibility of integrating genuine moral and ethical concerns with love. It is not so much a matter of putting a lid or cover on one's instinctual feelings, or bottling them up as evil or forbidden, but seeing how one's instinctual drives can be channeled in a way that is life-serving, enabling, purposeful and empowering. In Pentecost the hearts of the disciples are flooded with the love of God. They experience love as the essential core value embodied in everything that Jesus said and did, and which now can be the foundation of their own lives as well.

Religious faith, then, is less a matter of external constraints than a personal relationship with God, centered around love, wherein we possess the hope and confidence of integrating all the parts of who and what we are, and what we can be, with the generosity of spirit that Jesus demonstrated. With Pentecost love is no longer an abstraction, but something attainable for each of us, giving structure and meaning to our lives. So, every Sunday what we do when we come to Mass, quite simply, is to reaffirm God's love as that core value in our lives and to be empowered to put that love into practice.

Pentecost is the promise that if we can open our human spirit to God's own Holy Spirit, all the parts of who we are can be refashioned, making us whole, making us holy, not in some odd, pseudo-religious way, but in a way that touches the depths of who we are in all our uniqueness. Then, having been touched by the Spirit, we can work together with others similarly touched, to be the signs of God's love in our world today. Let us pray that we can be open to the healing, and open to the hallowing.